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The importance of ethnic-minority media: African-Australian media

Abstract

This paper presents interview data from the initial stages of what will become a larger research project on African migrants and the media in Australia. Interviews were conducted with African-Australian media producers, writers, journalists and presenters in Melbourne. Participants included in the study represent four community radio programs, a community television program, a website and a magazine. The aim of the research is to better understand the aims and motivations of African-Australian media producers, as well as their targeted audience and the socio-cultural role of their media both within the African communities in Australia and amongst the wider Australian public.

The media production of ethnic minorities is an important yet under-analysed area of research (Browne, 2005; Cover, 2012). Analyses that do focus on ethnic minorities and media have predominantly focused on transnational media consumption or the way in which ethnic groups are represented in mainstream media. Existing research on ethnic minority media production emphasises the importance of these media not only in terms of empowering minority communities, but also in potentially connecting with and affecting the majority public sphere (Husband, 1998; Couldry and Dreher, 2007). As Husband (1998) argues, it is important that minority media provide a space through which migrant voices can be heard and understood by the wider public.
It is argued in this paper that African media in Melbourne play an important dual role in both providing important symbolic and cultural resources for African-Australians and also in their capacity to encourage cross-cultural communication between African and non-African Australians. While participants aim their media at an African audience, a wider Australian audience is both explicitly targeted and implicitly engaged with. African-Australian media producers encourage positive cross-cultural understandings between African communities and the wider Australian public.

**Key Words:** Media, African-Australian, production, audiences.
The importance of migrant media: African-Australian media

Introduction

Through a series of interviews with African-Australian media producers this paper provides an understanding of the nature and role of African-Australian media from the perspective of those who produce, fund, and disseminate it. In particular, it will be argued that the workings of African-Australian media in Melbourne are intertwined with questions over the fragmentation of the public sphere and the recognition of ethnic minorities’ “right to be understood” in multi-ethnic societies (Husband, 1998: 137; Dreher, 2010). The aims and goals of the media producers interviewed in this project, as well as their understandings of their audiences, point to an ethnic minority media sphere that is far from disconnected from its majority social context. Instead, there is much about African-Australian media to suggest that they provide a space within which, to draw on Myria Georgiou (2005), the particular and the universal can interact and, perhaps, enter a dialogue (Husband, 1998). The findings of the research reveal the important role of ethnic minority media not only in terms of self-representation for migrant groups, but also in their capacity to encourage cross-cultural understanding between minorities and the mainstream public sphere.

The media production of ethnic minorities has not enjoyed the same level of academic attention as studies of mainstream media representations of race and ethnicity (Cover, 2012; Lee, 2012). However, studies of the Australian media’s coverage of African migrants offer an important contextual basis for this study, particularly when understanding the motivations of African-Australian media producers. Authors such as Due (2008), Marjoribanks et al (2010) and Windle (2008) have pointed to the way in which African-Australians are racialised and constructed as ‘Others’ in opposition to a normalised white Australian community (Due 2008; Marjoribanks et al 2010; Windle 2008). Furthermore, a 2009 Human Rights and Equal
Opportunity Commission report, titled *African Australians: A report on human rights and social inclusion issues*, has found that these negative media representations have real effects on African-Australians, contributing to reduced employment opportunities, lower rates of education, increased public and police surveillance, and a general feeling of exclusion from the majority public sphere (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 2009). The negative nature of the Australian media’s treatment of African-Australians, and the potential for these media portrayals to exclude African-Australians from the cultural, social and political forums of the wider Australian society, emphasises the importance of understanding ethnic minority media (Browne, 2005). There is a need to further analyse the ways in which migrant groups use media to provide spaces for the construction and articulation of their own notions of identity, community and politics, as well as their own understandings of the broader society and their place in it (Cover 2012). Understanding minority ethnic media can tell us much about the degree to which minority concerns find their way into the majority public sphere and the extent to which marginalised members of society are able to have their voices heard and understood.

**The importance of migrant media**

Before discussing the findings of the interviews with media producers, we consider the different roles attributed to ethnic media in understandings of the relationship between ethnic minorities and the majority society. Ethnic minority media have been both encouraged and greeted with suspicion in multi-ethnic societies around the world (Browne, 2005). As a central point through which cultural and social values can be reimagined and reinvented, ethnic minority media raise fears that the universal public sphere of the host society is at threat of fragmentation and ghettoization (Georgiou 2005). Indeed, in Australia in the early 1970s, when the issue of minority ethnic media was on the political agenda, opposition to
Ethnic media services was expressed through anxieties over subversive elements broadcasting in languages ‘we’ did not understand (Browne 2005). Ethnic minority media have been thought about predominantly as an alternative to the mainstream, a forum through which migrants can maintain their own culture but not necessarily interact with the dominant host society.

Such understandings, however, create an artificial antipathy between minority ethnic media and the majority society (Georgiou, 2005). The view of ethnic minority media espoused in these debates is of a divisive agent, set against a single public sphere that is under threat from oppositional values, languages and ideologies that are learnt and reinforced through ethnic media. However, ethnic minority media are better understood as important counter-public spheres in multi-ethnic democratic societies (Husband, 1998; Couldry and Dreher, 2007). The existence, or desirability, of a unified single majority public sphere at the level of the nation state has been challenged on several fronts, and the field of ethnic media studies is increasingly seeing ethnic minority media as forums through which alternative spaces of expression can potentially find their way into majority discourses and add to the equality and diversity of modern nation states (Couldry and Dreher, 2007). Thus, in addition to recognition of the existence of multiple public spheres in complex, multicultural societies, there is also a growing acknowledgement of the way in which communication between the particular and the universal can take place through minority ethnic media (Silverstone and Georgiou, 2005).

As Roger Silverstone and Myria Georgiou (2005) argue, any analysis of minority media must also be concerned with the way in which minority and majority media intertwine and affect each other, bringing the universal and the particularistic into contact and possibly even dialogue (Silverstone and Georgiou 2005). Nick Couldry and Tanja Dreher (2007) focus on just this point when discussing the way in which community media in Sydney can be
understood to inhabit and give rise to a range of minority public spheres. Importantly, these are not only counter-publics that stand in opposition to the dominant public sphere, having little effect on majority discourses. Rather, different minority media, such as Indigenous media in Australia, are able to construct spaces of dialogue between the universal and the particularistic, spaces in which the concerns of specialist media producers are able to find their way into the symbolic environment of the dominant public sphere. Seen in this light, ethnic minority media become not only important spaces for supporting minority communities, but also for allowing those communities to have their voices heard and understood within the political and social institutions of the majority society (Husband, 1998). The issue of dialogue and communication between minority ethnic media and the dominant public sphere is a recurring theme in the following interviews with 7 African-Australian media producers, workers, and broadcasters.

**Motivations and aims: countering negative media representations**

It is perhaps not surprising that the mainstream Australian media environment looms large when participants discuss the motivations and aims related to their media production.

According to Donald Browne (2005), one of the universal goals of producers of minority ethnic media is to combat negative stereotypes, including those disseminated in the mass media. The importance of ethnic media involves their sometimes-explicit aim to counter negative mass media discourses and images and to address issues important to minority groups, issues the mainstream media rarely engage with (Aksoy 2006; Gillespie 2006; Husband 2005).

Overwhelmingly, participants in this study are motivated to produce African media by the need to tell positive stories about African-Australians and to counter the negative stereotypes prevalent in the Australian mainstream media (Marjoribanks et al 2010). These motivations
point to the importance of the surrounding media environment in Australia, and in particular the lack of positive representations found in the Australian media. The producer and CEO of an African-Australian website explained his motivations in this way:

I put [it] together because I thought there was a need to create a platform that would tell a different story about Africans. Much of the media publications on African-Australian individuals and communities over the years have been negative and with my journalistic background I thought we can keep on telling the media to not be negative, but, how much chance do we have of achieving any change of that.

As well as countering the predominantly negative portrayals of African-Australians in the dominant media environment in Australia, participants also aim to promote the work of positive role models and community leaders. As well as empowering African-Australian communities, these role models are important ways of signifying to the wider Australian population that African migrants are capable of making positive contributions to Australian society (Browne, 2005). There is an attempt by media producers, then, to inform wider cultural and social understandings of African-Australians and to assist in cross-cultural understandings between African-Australians and other Australians. This involves focusing predominantly on issues that relate directly to the lives of Africans living in Australia, rather than diasporic networks and transnational concerns.

In some cases, the desire to present a more positive and accurate portrayal of African-Australians involves attempts, or at least the desire, to directly affect the way in which mainstream Australian media deal with issues involving African-Australians. Participants lament the fact that the Australian mainstream media rarely consult them when issues related to African communities are being covered. Respondents also overwhelmingly express a desire to devote more time and resources to impacting the Australian mass media by
maintaining more contact with relevant journalists and by more closely monitoring mass
media discourses about African-Australians.

One participant does actively contact journalists who have written stories about African-
Australians and asks them to explain their work in more detail. According to him, there has
been some positive change partly as a result of this practice:

I tell you what. Recently there was a Sudanese person that killed his mother in
Sunshine, and in the reporting of that incident no media talked about the nationality,
the ethnicity of … the offender. Whilst I can’t necessarily claim all the credit for that,
I’m sure what we did after the last publication from the police crime statistics … I’m
sure that it did have some impact.

Audiences
The way in which African-Australian media are involved in the intertwining of the universal
and particularistic is also evident in the audiences targeted by participants. Participants
actively target, or are open to, a wider Australian audience. At times the targeting of non
African-Australians is a stated goal of the media producer, as it is for both the producer of a
website and a community television program. Strategies for involving non African-
Australians in their media include broadcasting in English and having white Australian guests
on their programs. For example, one participant estimates, based on audience feedback, that
up to 40% of the audience for his media may be non African-Australians.

Producers who do not broadcast in English, such as the hosts of Ethiopian radio programs
broadcast in Amharic or Harari, still evidence a desire for their media to have some impact on
non African-Australians. For instance, the founder and host of a Harari language community
radio program explained that he hoped his work would pave the way for younger Ethiopian-
Australians to more positively engage with, and be involved in, the majority Australian society in an empowered way.

Participants in the study target various audiences. In addition to non African-Australians, audiences include African-Australians in general, specific ethnic or linguistic groups within Africa, and those who participants see as the most vulnerable, such as youth and single mothers. What is important to note is that participants do not close their media off to different audience groups, but instead recognise the importance of reaching out to a wider audience in order to both strengthen the African-Australian community and also to bring African-Australian issues and concerns into the majority public sphere. Rather than simply create an alternative mediated space separate from the mainstream public sphere, participants emphasise the importance of their products spreading throughout and reaching beyond an African-Australian audience (Couldry and Dreher, 2007).

**Conclusion**

It is important at this point to reflect on the nature and extent to which African-Australian issues are able to find their way into the discourses of the majority public sphere and the practices of the dominant media institutions. It should be said first of all that the openness to a mainstream Australian audience expressed by several participants is quite rare amongst ethnic minority media services (Browne, 2005). African media in Melbourne do not simply constitute a separate public sphere, with little attention paid to the majority society. Many participants actively engage with key stakeholders and representatives of important political and public institutions. Several also make a point of featuring white Australian guests on their programs. Indeed, even participants who do not broadcast in English place emphasis on enabling young African-Australians to confidently negotiate a hybrid cultural environment.
However, as Charles Husband argues, ethnic minority media must be part of the public sphere at a fundamental level to avoid becoming dislocated and unable to hold genuine dialogue with the mainstream. The stories, issues and discourses of African controlled and funded media have been able to make their way into Australian mainstream debates and dialogues to a limited degree only. The main reasons for this limitation are found in ethnic media throughout the world that must find a way to thrive in a market media system wherein ratings figures and commercial income rule (Browne, 2005). A lack of stable economic funding conditions, long-term professional employees and resources mean that participants are limited in their ability to expand their media to a more mainstream audience.

It is hoped that our research can positively inform the funding applications and outcomes of African media producers in Australia. As well as understanding the negative representations of migrant groups in the mainstream media, it is important that the voices of migrants are heard, not only through narratives of marginalisation, exclusion and anxiety, but also through the prism of how they go about addressing this marginalisation through the formation and maintenance of mediated spaces of self-representation.
References


